

## Looking back: Why Geometry teacher Yichen Zhang left, in her own words

By Julie Heng

I never had Ms. Yichen Zhang as a teacher - I took Geometry before she started teaching it at Huron last year - but anyone could tell she is the kind of teacher that cares.

A couple of weeks ago, she became our second mock trial coach. She'd take care to transcribe her thorough handwritten notes from our practice trials and email them to each of us. She always asked us what we needed before making thoughtful suggestions.

I'd talk to her about the University of Chicago, where she got her bachelor's in economics and a master's in education, not only about her experience on the mock trial team but about life and expectations and hopes and dreams.

Her former students describe her as "peppy" and "excited." She's the kind of person who listens to you intensely and dances with her eyes.

When I found out, midway through fourth hour, that today was Ms. Zhang's last day at Huron, I did a bit of a double take.

It turns out I wasn't the only one.

"It was just a lot of quiet shock," Zhang said. "I tried to [tell my students] it in a way that felt rushed to me. I didn't know if I could do it—not cry, hold it together—like, we still have a project we need to get done!"

But she'd been thinking about it for a while.

"Since the beginning of the year, I just had this feeling in my gut," Zhang said. "As the year went on, it just didn't go away. And it was just like a lot of dread a lot of negativity, and I couldn't place it."

This year, she was teaching five sections of Geometry in three classrooms, which she thought would be better than last year, when she taught four sections of Geometry and one Geometry AC in four classrooms—but it didn't get better.

“I was more exhausted,” Zhang said. “My heart goes out to everybody who has to switch between the classrooms, especially as a teacher. We're all trying to make sure everything is shipshape.”

She felt like she wasn't giving students the feedback she wanted to give them fast enough. She felt like she couldn't take care of her students and make sure they were all learning.

“I think most people didn't appreciate her as much as they should have,” sophomore and Georgian exchange student Giorgi Berdzenishvili said. “I'm probably the only one who thinks so. She showed us videos that helped a lot and even translated quizzes and tests from English to Georgian for me. She was constantly asking kids to stop talking. And I think it was really hard on her.”

Some students admitted they'd just stay on their phones during class, whether during lectures, activities or otherwise.

“I understand...the pressure and stress that students are under,” Zhang said. But for some students, “sometimes that kind of comes out” in class.

“There's a lot of you that is outside of this classroom, that's even outside of the school, that needs to be taken care of,” Zhang said. “And I was getting frustrated that I couldn't do that in the time and under the constraints that I was given. Again, unrealistic expectations, but it was just a layer after layer of exhaustion.”

The stress also manifested physiologically—pain lasting weeks that would keep her up or wake her up.

“I was turning into somebody that I did not like: I was not as patient as I wanted to be. I was not as empathetic as I wanted to be,” she said.

She saw the effect of her behavior on her family. She started feeling the alarming tug of toxic internal dialogue.

Two weeks ago, she announced her resignation. It was a Friday.

There were definitely students that brought positive energy to every class. For that, she was grateful.

“There have been a lot of good times here,” Zhang said. “And I really don't want any of [my students] to think there's anything that they did. There's a certain point where I realized I just have to take care of myself.”

For the time being, she hopes to finally get that gym membership. Clean the apartment. Eat healthier. Read. Think.

Think about the state of education, she says. About the disconnect between high school and college math and practical life skills. About equity in a much larger system designed “to exhaust you so that you don't have as much time to take care of your students and have it be equitable for everyone.” She heard that at a conference, once. It really struck her.

I asked her if she might want to be a part of such educational development. For now, she said she's completely stepping back.

“I will keep my ears open, but I am not going to be involved in anything yet,” she said. “Just to sort out where I am. And to make sure that whatever I decide to do next, I go into it with a very healthy mindset and with realistic expectations.”

Ms. Zhang took a second to swallow a few almost-tears. Her many-layered scarf, covered in colorful logos of Hogwarts houses, was loud in the quiet room. Her hair was pinned up as always. She wore a thin silver watch on her left wrist and a jade bracelet on her right.

In Chinese culture, it is said that wearing jade has healing properties. When you're healthy, you nourish it, so that when you're ill, it nurses you.

“I appreciate everyone around me a lot more,” she told me. “Because everyone is struggling through something.”

She insisted I take a doughnut, and then she smiled.